

A Line in the Sand

Police Commissioner Suspends Cop; Union Goes Ape

by [Matt Davis](#)

SCOTT WESTERMAN: Portland Police Association president.



POLICE COMMISSIONER Dan Saltzman suspended Portland Police Officer Christopher Humphreys, with pay, on Thursday, November 19—starting a vicious political dogfight with the Portland Police Association, the union representing over 900 rank-and-file officers.

Saltzman, who is up for reelection next spring, was already facing pressure to impose harsher discipline on Humphreys, the most controversial of three officers involved in the 2006 death in custody of James Chasse Jr., a man with schizophrenia. Witnesses saw Humphreys beat Chasse brutally in the street before he died with 16 broken ribs, and policing experts have since described his use of force and failure to secure medical transport for Chasse as "unreasonable," while a lawsuit brought by the dead man's family continues ["Terminal Energy," News, July 9].

On November 4, Saltzman gave Humphreys just two weeks off for his role in the tragedy, prompting fellow City Commissioner Randy Leonard to describe him as a "parrot for the police chief," Rosie Sizer ["Saltzman in the Wound," Hall Monitor, Nov 12]. Meanwhile, mental health advocates have slammed Saltzman's "basic lack of courage" regarding the Chasse incident ["Scapegoating Saltzman," News, Oct 15].

Then last Saturday night, November 14, in East Portland, Humphreys shot a 12-year-old girl in the leg with a "less lethal" beanbag shotgun, after she struggled with a fellow officer who was trying to arrest her for violating an exclusion from MAX, the city's light rail.

Saltzman suspended Humphreys, saying the actions he saw on a video of the incident—which was subsequently released to the public—were "not consistent with my expectations and what I believe are the community's expectations for a Portland police officer."

The police commissioner also overruled Chief Sizer, who told reporters she was "troubled" by the incident, but that she would await the findings of an internal affairs investigation before imposing discipline.

"The police union can no longer tell its officers that politics do not play a part in discipline," said Police Union President Scott Westerman, flanked by 40 of his fellow cops at a hastily convened press conference last week on the steps of the Multnomah County Justice Center on SW 3rd.

"Officer Humphreys' action was appropriate, justified, warranted, and necessary," he continued.

Later that night, at a long-scheduled public safety meeting at Jefferson High School in Northeast Portland, Saltzman told the *Mercury* his decision to suspend Humphreys was "not political."

"It's based on what I saw on the videotape," he said.

Over the weekend, Westerman distributed "no confidence" ballots to his membership, for both Saltzman and Sizer. A "Support Officer Chris Humphreys" Facebook group was started, which had 803 members by press time, and on Tuesday morning, November 24, 650 union members and their families and friends marched on city hall wearing T-shirts and carrying signs, many of which read, "I am Chris Humphreys."

To loud cheers and a little heckling, Westerman asked the community to "stand with us," and criticized Saltzman for putting "political expediency before public safety."

Meanwhile, every single member of city council says they support Saltzman's move, even though it is understood to have come as a surprise to them last week. Commissioner Leonard is also the only commissioner to support a change in police chief, with the others all explicitly supporting Sizer's leadership.

Even if the police union's membership votes overwhelmingly that it has "no confidence" in Saltzman and Sizer, it is unclear what impact such a vote will have. Indeed, it could simply show that the police union's outrage is powerless against the wishes of Portland's city commissioners, and by extension, the voters.

"This is a medium for our voice to be heard," said Westerman on November 24, when asked what he would do if city council ignores the union's no-confidence vote. He declined, too, to say which city commissioner he would prefer to head up the police bureau—having already called for Mayor Sam Adams' resignation over an unrelated sex scandal, earlier this year.

"In this context, I'd say the actions on both sides are predictable," says Gina Rae Hendrickson, a federal and state mediator and negotiation coach specializing in workplace issues, based in Santa Barbara, California. "Any time you have an incident like this, people have to rally forth. For the police commissioner, it's public relations, and for the police union, they need to be seen as useful. Many negotiations are about playing to an audience that's not at the table.

"A collaboration isn't always appropriate," Hendrickson continues. "This might be a case of winning. Either the union wins or the commissioner wins. Or it might just be a necessary ruckus, with the way the entities are set up—each entity advocating for its own audience."